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Caring for Older Relatives From a Distance

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Families these days rarely seem to live in the same city, or even the same part of the country. And it's not just children who have moved away to go to college or pursue a career. Parents, especially when they retire, are just as likely to be the ones to move—to a warmer climate or because they have the freedom in later life to live anywhere they'd like.

These are mostly wonderful developments that signal the energy and health of our aging loved ones. But what happens when our parents' situation changes, when one dies, or an illness makes it harder for Mom or Dad to continue living independently? How can caregivers do their job if they don't live nearby?

If someone you care for is living far away, the natural anxiety you may feel about his or her welfare will probably be intensified. In addition, you may experience feelings of guilt about not being there for an emergency or to help your parent cope with the physical changes that come with old age. This potential combination of anxiety, guilt and frustration can cause significant stress in a long-distance caregiver's life, stress that is usually in addition to more immediate worries about children, work and all the other concerns that are part of daily living.

Becoming overwhelmed by worries about your aging parents won't be helpful to them, and certainly won't make it easier for you. The following suggestions will help you prepare for or deal with the requirements of caring for your older loved ones, even if you live far away from them.

Knowing when to intervene: assessing needs long-distance

As your parent(s) grow older, you may become increasingly aware of physical changes that make it harder for them to maintain their independent lifestyle. Vision and hearing may deteriorate, physical frailty increases and mental awareness may decline. For most people, these changes occur so slowly that monitoring them is a challenge even for on-site caregivers. If you are living across the country from your parent, the challenge becomes all the greater.

What can the long-distance caregiver do?

The first step is to conduct your own assessment of your older loved one's needs. Even on the phone, you can gather a lot of important information about physical and cognitive declines that may

become serious problems and require alterations to the older person's living situation. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is your parent able to prepare his or her own meals?
- Does your parent still have friends and a social life?
- Are medical needs being properly attended to?
- Is your parent managing his or her own medication(s)?
- Is your parent's living situation safe?
- Is your parent still able to manage his or her own finances?
- What is the state of your parent's health?
- What long-term plans need to be made for the future?

Regular phone calls to your parent can be brief, but very informative if you plan the conversation ahead of time and stay focused. Be gentle, but persistent. Remember, the information you're evaluating may be extremely difficult for the older person to acknowledge. After all, it is your parent's continued ability to live independently that you are questioning. Don't be surprised if strong emotions and even resistance arise during these conversations.

Also, remember that your perceptions may differ from how your parents view the situation. What you perceive as a development requiring drastic action may not appear that way to them at all. Try not to let your anxiety and need for assurance overcome your respect for your loved one's independence: they may be older and adjustments may need to be made to their living situation, but it is still their lives and their right to decide how and where they will live it. Be patient. Listen carefully. Many older people will choose to compromise and adjust to the changes they're experiencing rather than give up their cherished independence.

There is a significant exception to this attitude, and that is when you suspect your parent is no longer mentally capable of evaluating personal needs and limitations. If you feel your parent is no longer capable of making informed decisions, or of understanding the full consequences of choices, a doctor should be brought in to conduct a cognitive assessment. Even a diagnosis of dementia, however, doesn't mean your parent must move. Resources are available to help keep your parent safe and at home. Identifying and organizing these resources are part of the next basic step: setting up a care plan.

Systems of care: establishing and implementing a plan

When you're not nearby, who helps your parent with little things like shopping or changing a light bulb? Odds are, your parent has already found an informal support network made up of other family members and friends who are living nearby to run errands or complete tasks that he or she can no longer accomplish alone. Find out who these helpers are and how you might contact them in case of an emergency or to ask for additional or more consistent support. You may find these friends more than willing to provide additional help. Consider asking them to:

- Visit your parent(s) regularly, at least once a week, and observe his or her appearance, behavior and living conditions. Ask the friend to contact you if there are sudden changes or deteriorations in these areas.
- Provide transportation, either on an as-needed or regular basis. Getting safely to and

from medical appointments, religious services, shopping and even social events is very difficult for many older people. Helpers who are willing can provide this need.
- Socialize with your older relative. Isolation is a terrible burden for many older individuals. Ask a friend to visit Mom and/or Dad once or twice a month to share a meal or help them prepare a meal for a small gathering of friends or neighbors.

Cultivate a group of local volunteer helpers who will act as your "eyes and ears" regarding your older parents and their changing needs. Be sure to provide your home and work phone numbers to the helpers you trust the most, and encourage them to call you collect if they develop a concern or even have a question about your parent's living situation.

Just because you are the primary caregiver for your aging parent should not mean that you are the only caregiver. Other family members who have less direct involvement in day-to-day caregiving decisions can provide other kinds of help. In fact, they may just be looking for an appropriate way to do so. Consider these options:

- Ask someone to be the accountant. Most businesses, utilities and merchants will send their bills to whatever address is convenient to the customer. A separate checking account can be established with money to pay regular monthly bills. The volunteer "accountant" might also keep track of important papers and other information involving taxes, and perhaps will also be able to have tax returns prepared.
- Ask someone to be the secretary. This volunteer could maintain a mailing list for your parents and help them send holiday cards and facilitate other correspondence such as birthday cards. Even long-distance, this can be done with a little planning and ingenuity.
- Ask someone to research a legal issue, or gather information about a needed service or product. The Internet and phone allow anyone anywhere to do the time-consuming work of getting the right information to make informed decisions.
- Ask other family members to take over day-to-day caregiving chores during their visits. This will not only offer a respite to regular caregivers, but will also give these individuals an opportunity to form their own opinions about the changes and capabilities of the older person.

Paid caregivers

Using the services of family members as mentioned above, may be appropriate for some families, but may not be comprehensive or extensive enough for others. In these instances, using paid caregivers may be indicated. Some support services might include the following:

- Geriatric care managers**:** Professionals who assist older adults and their families in obtaining and coordinating a variety of services. They provide assessment, education, counseling, long term planning, crisis intervention, assistance with financial, legal and medical issues and can act as a liaison for long distance family members.
- Meals-on-wheels: Meals delivered to a person's home.
- Emergency response systems: Connects the person to immediate medical services.
- Telephone reassurance programs: Provides phone calls to check on the older person's safety and well-being.
- Volunteer caregivers: Provide brief visits to check on your relative. They may be from local churches, synagogues or schools.
- Home attendants: Provide personal care services, such as bathing, feeding or dressing

and may provide light housekeeping services.
- Visiting nurse services: Provide medical care.

Another valuable source of information is your relative's doctor. Try to get your relative's permission to speak to his or her doctor before you attempt to do so. Doctors honor patients confidentiality and may be unwilling to disclose information to you without the patient's consent.

Face-to-face: making your visits count

Once a caregiving network or systems have been established, it is important to monitor the situation carefully. The best way to do this is to plan regular visits that allow you quality personal time with your older relative, as well as to achieve these goals:

- Reassessment of needs and continuing success of the current caregiving plan and structures.
- Providing for new or changing needs.
- Maintenance of strong monitoring systems to ensure the ongoing safety and comfort of the older person.

Make your visit count. The physical and mental changes your parent is experiencing will require some vigilance to keep on top of. No one can do this as well as you, and you can only do it effectively and sensitively if you see for yourself what the needs are and whether the caregiving plan you've set up continues to work well.

Consider these questions during your in-person visit:

- Is the home clean and safe? Check for dangerous situations such as sliding throw rugs, loose stair railings, unsafe water heating settings, etc.
- Do you notice a change or deterioration in the older relative's grooming habits?
- Can your older parent get around safely and relatively easily? Is there public transportation accessible and affordable? What other transportation options might be arranged?
- Do friends and other family members visit, stop by or call? How often?

If the answers to these questions make you uncomfortable, a change may need to be made. Consider holding a family meeting involving your older relative and other family members who are involved in helping make decisions about caregiving. Brainstorm solutions to problems or needs that are identified. A family meeting is also a good time to secure promises of support and additional help from those who attend.

Finally, what do you do if your older parent calls you with an emergency and wants you to come over right away? This is tricky. Perhaps this kind of call becomes a regular occurrence. You may suspect there is another motivation (attention, unfounded fear, etc.) for the cry for help.

Think about your parents' personalities and ways of handling their needs and problems. If they rarely or never complain of a problem and now are wanting help in an emergency, immediately contact their doctor and the nearest and most trusted of their friends or caregivers who are nearby.

However, if the cries for help are regular and undefined, step back and analyze how you can reassure your Mom or Dad without disrupting your own life (and spending the money to travel on short notice) to be with him or her. Remember to take care of yourself first. Allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by your older relatives' needs and requests won't be good for you, and ultimately not for them either. Ask for help. It is available.

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